

MOTHER AND TRANSGENDERED SON: A STUDY OF GENDER ROLE CONFLICT IN SHERWOOD ANDERSON'S "MOTHER"

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ABSTRACT

In a conventional society men are expected to be masculine. Unlike women, they must be resolute, authoritarian and truculent. In comparison to men, women are presumed to exhibit feminine gender traits like submissiveness, compassion and obedience. However, if a discrepancy is found between a man/woman's gender expression and his/her biologically assigned sex, then it is called GRC or Gender Role Conflict. GRC often leads to an inability to perform according to one's assigned gender role. In addition to that Gender Role Conflict can also create transgender identities. Transgender individuals are physically of one gender, mentally of the other. When a man starts behaving like a woman, he is called a male-to-female or MtF transgender man. Since it is considered a violation of social standards, GRC creates difficulties in his social and family life. Nevertheless, proper guidance and assistance from friends and family members can aid him adequately. This issue is poignantly dealt by American author Sherwood Anderson in his story "Mother". Here Elizabeth Willard is a "grotesque" suffering from a life-long gender role conflict. Her son George Willard is an MtF transgender man who endures similar conflicts throughout his life. When society wants George to fulfill his masculine duties, his mother recognizes the inherent woman in him. This paper will explore Elizabeth's motherly empathy for her transgender son as it helps him to resolve his gender role conflict and inspires him to live a normal life.

Key words: Gender Role Conflict (GRC), male-to-female transgender (MtF), Empathy, Mother, Relationship

American author Sherwood Anderson (1876-1941) generally wrote stories about the "grotesque". (Kozono 43). The grotesque is a complex personality who seeks his true identity amidst others. For Anderson the word "grotesque" does not connote "revulsion or disgust" as it conventionally does. Instead he suggests that the human grotesque is like "the gnarled and twisted apples" that are dropped behind the orchards when the round ones are picked (Kozono 45). Many people disregard them but the small boys and the poor seek these apples eagerly because of their unlikeness (Kozono 45). Grotesques (like these deformed apples) are peculiar but they are singular for their honesty and purity. (Kozono 43). In Anderson's story "Mother", we find two grotesque characters: Elizabeth Willard and her son George Willard. Both of them have distinctive personalities due to their Gender Role Conflict or GRC. At an age when gender was divided into "strict categories of male and female", and those who deviated from these categories were automatically labeled as

pathological" (Wester *et al.* 214). By analyzing the characters of Elizabeth and George Willard it can be inferred that Elizabeth is a victim of her innate gender role conflicts and George has to deal with the problems inherent in a male-to-female transgender. The story accords Elizabeth's attempt to release her son from his predicaments in a gender prejudiced society. By depicting this phenomenal mother-son relationship, Anderson suggests that if a grotesque gets sympathy and compassion from family members, his/her life can equally be pleasant and peaceful like any other normal human being (Kozono 49). Therefore, Sherwood Anderson's story "Mother" can be considered as a mother's endeavor to assist her transgender son to establish his true gender identity through forbearance and empathy.

Literature Review

Gender Studies experts Wester, McDonough, White, Vogel & Taylor (2010) define transgender

individuals in their article “Using Gender Role Conflict Theory in Counseling Male-to-Female Transgender Individuals”. According to their study, transgender human beings are those who experience a discrepancy between their biological sex and psychological awareness of gender. They feel “more comfortable in the identity of the other gender”. When “rigid, sexist, or overly restrictive gender roles” are imposed on them, they face GRC or gender role conflict (214). Often social and situational pressures place them under difficult conditions. Wester *et al.* (2010) propose that in order to be comfortable with their true gender identity and to lead a healthy life, transgender human beings need sympathy from their family members. Sherwood Anderson depicts transgender characters in his book *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919). As Kim Kil-Joong’s shows in his “The Context of Exile Motifs in Sherwood Anderson”, Anderson terms these “obsessed, suppressed and isolated” characters as “the grotesques” (1984, p. 124-125). Toshiyuki Kozono (1983) in his article “Sherwood Anderson’s View on the Grotesques” and Tomar Khetsuriani (2013) in his “Sherwood Anderson’s ‘Mother’ and the Evaluation of the Genre” talk about the singularity of these complex characters. In light of these studies, this paper explores Sherwood Anderson’s “Mother” as a remarkable portrayal of a mother’s efforts to support her transgender son.

Discussion

Sherwood Anderson’s “Mother” deals with a secret bond between George Willard and his mother Elizabeth Willard. Elizabeth leads a life of a social outcast. She is lonely as well as unhappy in her marriage with Tom Willard. She accumulates all her love and affection for her only son. Reciprocally, George loves his mother more than his father. Moreover, he executes his relationship with his mother by identifying himself with her. Like his mother, he is reluctant to step out of the house; he cannot socialize with other men or women (Khetsuriani, 2013, 139). He acts like “a gawky girl” (Anderson, 1919, para. 11). Biologically he is a man but he behaves like a woman. Elizabeth understands this issue as she herself has been a victim of gender role conflicts. She identifies similar conflicts in her son. When she kneels upon the floor of her son’s room, she hears the boy moving about and talking in low tones. George Willard’s habit of talking aloud to himself always gives his mother “a peculiar

pleasure” (Anderson, 1919, para. 8). She whispers, “...within him there is a secret something that is striving to grow. It is the thing I let be killed in myself” and there is also nothing paternal to him (Khetsuriani 142). She identifies the feminine spirit inside George’s masculine body. Through this incident the mother recognizes that she and her son are of the same breed (Khetsuriani 142). Thus, the mother becomes able to connect with her son appropriately.

Meanwhile, if we analyze the character of Elizabeth, we will find that though being a biological female, she is confused about her feminine gender roles; she is more comfortable around men. In her girlhood and before her marriage with Tom Willard, Elizabeth had a “shaky reputation” in Winesburg. She was labeled as “stage-struck” (Anderson, 1919, para 14). She was attracted to theatre because drama helps people to hide their true identity. She was more interested to lead an adventurous, carefree man’s life. She paraded through the streets “with traveling men guests at her father’s hotel”. She loved the company of men and she wanted to be like them. Once she even “startled the town by putting on men’s clothes and riding a bicycle down Main Street”, (Anderson, 1919, para. 14). She was “tall and gaunt” and she lacked feminine attributes (Anderson, 1919, para 1). In her own mind she was much confused about her appropriate gender traits. There was a “great restlessness” in her for an “uneasy desire for change, for some big definite movement to her life” (Anderson, 1919, para 15). She dreamed of being a hero “wandering over the world, seeing always new faces and giving something out of herself to all people” (Anderson, 1919, para 15). Sometimes she tried to talk of these matters but her ideas lead her nowhere. People who heard her mostly did not seem to know what she meant. However, the “traveling men” always seemed to understand and sympathize with her. “On the side streets of the village, in the darkness under the trees, they took hold of her hand” and she felt that “something unexpressed in herself came forth and became a part of an unexpressed something in them” (Anderson, 1919, para 15). She found that she shared certain male attributes with them. Elizabeth was more comfortable among men (Anderson, 1919, para 15).

Consequently, these gender role confusions continued in Elizabeth and resulted in a very unhappy married life. Wester *et. al* (2010) argues

that "being transgender is independent of one's sexual orientation" as "some transgender individuals are attracted to members of the same sex and others are attracted to members of the opposite sex" (214). Elizabeth here was attracted to men. Though she married Tom Willard out of her desire to stay around men: the patterns related to male gender role conflict were always present in her. The marriage was disastrous for both of them. The misery correlated with depression, anxiety, relation difficulties and overall physiological distress. Elizabeth turned into a ghostlike figure; her face grew intimidating because of the "smallpox scars". Now when she is around forty-five years old, "some obscure disease" seems to wipe "the fire out of her figure" (Anderson, 1919, para 1). She walks listlessly around the disorderly old hotel. She spends her time alone in her room most of the time. Similarly, Tom Willard gets angry at the very thought of his wife. For him "the old house and the woman who lived there with him" are the things of defeat. He is afraid of his ghostlike wife. He often aimlessly sputters "Damn such a life, damn it!" (Anderson, 1919, para. 1). Elizabeth is helpless because Tom is unwilling to provide her support to deal with her gender role conflicts. Thus, she often compares her relationship with Tom to "the absurd struggle of a baker with a little, hungry cat" at a nearby bakery. The baker is sick and tired of life and the cat tries to take a few bites in the bakery. This is absurd because "the baker's misfortune is not the cat's fault". However, "the cat is the only visible, concrete and, accessible creature that the baker can put the blame on for all his troubles". When the cat and the baker fight, Elizabeth feels that it all seems like "a rehearsal of her own life, terrible in its vividness" (Anderson, 1919, para. 4). Her own fate bears a striking similarity to this scene and "she bursts into tears" (Khetsuriani 142). Her gender role conflict is responsible for her miserable married life.

Nevertheless, both of George's parents are his well-wishers, but only his mother is aware about his gender role conflicts. This is why her empathy is more important than the father's strict approach to ameliorate the son's condition. Furthermore, the story is set in the backdrop of an unhappy marriage and its central focus lies upon the relationship between the mother and son. This makes the father more like an antagonist in their lives. According to Khetsuriani (138), this story involves a triangular relationship of selfhoods where George Willard

represents the central determinant figure for his parents. As George's father Tom Willard is ambitious for his son, he wants his son to be successful in his life. He even manages him a job at the *Winesburg Eagle* (Anderson, 1919, para. 11). However, Tom is a threat for George since he represents "a part of an overall culture that rejects" the idea of a transgender (Wester *et. al.* 215-16). As a result, Tom is unhappy about his son's way of living his life. Moreover, there were accusations against George that he does not respond when he is spoken to. Tom tries to help his son by saying, "you're not a fool and you're not a woman. You're Tom Willard's son and you'll wake up. I'm not afraid" (Anderson, 1919, para. 11). He tries to transform his son according to his wish. However, the father's attempt to treat the son like a man infuriates the mother. She considers herself as a friend and his husband as a threat for George. She disapproves Tom's approach to adjudicate her son. Anderson writes,

Although for years she had hated her husband, her hatred had always before been a quite impersonal thing. He had been merely a part of something else that she hated. Now, and by the few words at the door, he had become the thing personified..."I will stab him," she said aloud. "He has chosen to be the voice of evil and I will kill him. When I have killed him something will snap within myself and I will die also. It will be a release for all of us. (Anderson 1919, para. 13)

Elizabeth considers her husband as the dominating agent of a society that violates individual freedom. She takes "a long pair of sewing scissors" (Anderson, 1919, para. 13) and decides to stab him. Later, she realizes that it is not the fault of men in general but it is the fear of disclosing one's true gender identity. Inherently, Elizabeth believes that asserting this truth will set them all free. She brings in the make-up box left by the theatrical companies and she decides to be beautiful by saying, "No ghostly worn-out figure should confront Tom Willard, but something quite unexpected and startling" (Anderson, 1919, para 18). She wants to startle the world with her new look and by taking up a disguise she intends to revolt against the society which tries to harm her child's individuality. She wants to prove that there is nothing wrong in being grotesque. Therefore, the mother's introspection to handle her son's gender role conflicts is more effective than the father's strict approach.

Afterwards, Elizabeth decides that she will play an active role to help her son. She takes some moderate steps to execute her plan. The steps she takes can be divided into several stages which Wester *et al.* (2010) consider helpful in assisting a transgender male for coming into terms with his new gender identity. At an initial level an awareness or “consciousness of the internal sense of feeling different” occurs within the individual. “At this stage, transgender individuals develop an understanding that they do not fit societal expectations for their biological gender role” (214). Elizabeth helps George to develop this awareness. Secondly, “[O]ften, individuals in this stage have a history of attempting to suppress their transgender feelings,” by different means, for example, through religious affiliation. Elizabeth often prays and through her prayer she urges to see “something half forgotten that had once been a part of her” in the boyish figure (Anderson, 1919, para. 3). Though she has suppressed her actual gender attributes, she desires that her son will not hesitate to express his true identity. Thirdly, a transgender person wants to seek information regarding his gender. When he tries to socialize by holding a traditional job, he is placed “in the social context” (Wester *et al.* 216). He does this to reduce distress but “that, instead, increases it exponentially” (Wester *et al.* 215), for example, George holds the job of a reporter but he fails to fulfill his responsibilities. Fourthly, he tries to explore the meaning of being a transgender man and feels comfortable with his identity. This is why George locks himself up in his room and talks to himself (Anderson, 1919, para. 8). Furthermore, he becomes slightly vulnerable because he has to respond to “the reaction of others”. The society perceives him as a male and expects certain behavior patterns from him. It can also punish him for his deviation from standards. Thus, George faces his father’s reprimand when the father as a social agent tries to transfigure him. Nonetheless, the mother recognizes that George is unable to be “concerned with boyish affairs” (Anderson, 1919, para. 6). Finally, with mother’s help he reaches the step of disclosure. This refers to the act of informing others. This can be a frightening prospect because there will always be a fear that the society will see him as “abnormal” and might consider his new sexuality as “the most extreme violation of socialized gender role expectations” (Wester *et al.* 217). At this stage, friendly relationship among family members becomes crucial. By the end of the story, George learns to integrate his gender identity by accepting his actual

gender traits. When mother enquires George about his plans, he replies,

“I suppose I can’t make you understand, but oh, I wish I could” ... “I can’t even talk to father about it. I don’t try. There isn’t any use. I don’t know what I shall do. I just want to go away and look at people and think...I suppose it won’t be for a year or two but I’ve been thinking about it...something father said makes it sure that I shall have to go away.” (Anderson, 1919, para. 21)

George knows that the disclosure will hurt his father. On top of that, he already has been labeled as a girl by the society. He decides to leave this society because it will never accept the girl in him. Nonetheless, his decisions make his mother happy. She wants to cry out with joy but she opts for trial and error and says, “I think you had better go out among the boys. You are too much indoors,” and her son replies, “I thought I would go for a little walk”. Then he steps “awkwardly out of the room” closing the door (Anderson, 1919, para. 22).

In addition it should be noted that the typical Anderson hero either rejects society or is rejected by society as his “alienated characters retain human warmth just for the reason that they are not existential outcasts but dreaming exiles”. (Kil-Joong 119). George will never find his place in this hostile society, he will not get lost in the wilderness, instead through his dreams he will create a new habitat for himself. According to American tradition, when a boy leaves his home, he enters manhood. However, George does not really leave his home (Khetsuriani 138-139). He just decides that he will never join the other boys. He will remain as an insider like her mother. At the same time, mother will always stand by him. Initially George will hesitate, but if his mother continues to support him, he will be successful in creating a purposeful life for himself.

Limitations

Though George will lead a healthy and normal life through his mother’s inspiration, there will always be some limitations on the path of his well being. These are:

Lack of Communication

Successful counseling depends a lot on verbal communication and the family members, who are

supporting transgender men, must speak a lot to them. However, George and his mother do not talk much with each other. Since the communion between the son and the mother is outwardly a formal meeting without meaning, they often feel embarrassed. When she is ill and sits by the window in her room, he sometimes goes in the evening to pay her a visit. In the evening when the son sits in the room with his mother, the silence makes them both feel embarrassed (Anderson, 1919, para. 22). This should not be happening.

Uncertain Termination Process

Wester *et al.* (2010) suggest that the termination process may occur over many months and some transgender individuals may revert to their previous gender. At the same time, they may experience post transition depression. Transition often does not “fix” all of the problems in life (218). There is no guarantee that George will feel complete and will successfully adopt a new life.

Individual Uniqueness

Every transgender man is completely a unique individual and he should be treated according to his own definite needs (Wester *et. al.* 218). George's experience is unique and what has worked for him might not work for every transgender man.

Conclusion

In Sherwood Anderson's story “Mother”, a mother's attempt to help her transgender son gives him a new life. Instead of fear and confusion, George will now accept his new identity with more ease and comfort. If this model of Elizabeth Willard's support for her son George is followed while counseling male-to-female transgender men, many problems related to gender role conflicts may be resolved.

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